

Dr. S. Sobana

Assistant Professor of English, Department of English,

The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women

Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu, India

dr.s.sobana@gmail.com

Mothers' And Daughters' Struggle for Identity in Amy Tan's Novel: The Joy Luck Club: A  
Theoretical Approach

Abstract: Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* revolves around the development of an identity in which immigrant experience. The aim of this essay is to investigate the process of identity formation of the second-generation Chinese immigrant daughters who encounter Chinese culture at home while having the immediate experience of living in America, with a focus on the cultural, language and generational gaps that exist between the Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters. This study is guided by a theoretical framework that combines a number of established theories of identity construction in order to analyze and explore the American-born daughters' identity creation. The novel *The Joy Luck Club* emphasizes the importance of the mothers in defining the identities of the daughters.

Keywords: Identity, Cultural, Mother, Daughter, Relationship.

'I realized that the first word must have been: ma, the sound of a baby smacking its lips in search of her mother's breast. For a long time that was the only word the baby needed...A mother is always the beginning. She is how things begin' (Bonesetter's Daughter, 299).  
Every man has a personality. Personality is nothing but the characters formed in us by the

social environment or the childhood habits which become the characters. If it is so, then the characters are transferred from people or circumstance around us. A man gets into different relationships in different situations in his life. Out of all the other relationships mother child relationships is like a magnet, attracting everybody's attention. Mother plays a great role in bringing up the child. The mother becomes the center point. Every man has an Identity. Identity is the character or personality of an individual. Cultural identity is how people or individual is differentiated in group.

Amy Tan is one such writer who writes about the mother daughter relationships in her novels. Chinese American literature comes under and the recognition for the Chinese American writers. These writers are born to the immigrants from China. These writers concentrate on themes of identity, race, gender and culture issues. In the beginning Chinese American literature appeared only under the name Asian American literature. Amy Tan was born in 1952 in Oakland, California to John Tan and Daisy, who were the Chinese immigrants. They came to America from China in the late 1940s. She is now living in San Francisco with her husband.

Amy Tan's works are, novels: *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2003), and *The Valley of Amazement* (2013). She produced two children books: *The Moon Lady* (1992) and *The Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994). Her non-fictional works: *Mid-Life Confidential: The Rock Bottom Reminds Tour America With Three Cords and an Attitude* (co-authored in 1994), *Mother* (co-authored in 1996), *The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings* (2013), and *Hard Listening* (co-authored in 2013).

Amy Tan's first novel *the Joy Luck Club* (JLC) is about four pairs of Chinese mothers and their American born daughters. Tan's this book is 'a kind of new writing' (Mallikarjun, 215). All the four mothers carry their memories about their miserable and desperate life

caused by the War in China. The book has four sections – Feathers from a Thousand Li Away, The Twenty – Six Malignant Gates, American Translation and Queen Mother of the Western Skies. Each section includes four set of stories narrated by any of the character in the fiction. It is either narrated by the Chinese mothers or the American born daughters.

The mother characters are Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair. The American born daughters to these mothers are Jing-mei “June” Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong, and Lena St. Clair. Suyuan starts the joy luck club in San Francisco, an old custom from China. The ladies play mah jong, eat sumptuous food and spend the whole night sharing tales and stories. The novel opens with the death of Suyuan and her place is replaced by her daughter Jing-mei at the mah jong. The narration begins and ends with Jing-mei, she is a bridge between the old and new generation. While playing mah jong they begin to share the stories and gossips.

This novel is more that deals with the relationship between the mother and the daughter. In the first section, though the stories revolved around the Chinese mothers and the Chinese daughters, completely happening in the places of China. It shows how important a mother daughter relationship is. Moreover it proves the importance of a mother for the growth of a child, and also that a girl child is always attached to a mother at all times irrespective of problems and sufferings they undergo in the relationship. Though the main focus is in the relationship between the Chinese mothers and their American born daughters, the analysis aims at focusing the role of the mother’s in the development of their daughter’s identity.

Suyuan who thought that one could be anything one wanted to be in America. First she thought that Jing-mei could be a Chinese Temple. She displays movies to capture the acting techniques and the nuances in acting profession. She took her daughter to the beauty training school. Instead of getting big fat curls, she got an uneven mass of crinkly black fuzz.

Jing- mei with her new haircut Peter pan and loves it and look forward for future fame. After watching the Ed Sullivan show, Suyuan wanted to find talents in her daughter. She arranged piano classes for Jing-mei. Mr. Chong was a retired piano teacher who lived on the first floor of their apartment. She traded housecleaning services for weekly lessons and a piano for Jing-mei to practice for two hours a day from four to six. She offers all the help that Jing-mei needs in order to achieve success in life. Often 'a hope for a particular family member would also mean sacrifice on the part of the other members' (Yin, p163).

Language and Culture became a very big hindrance in the relationship between mothers and daughters as the daughter find it difficult to understand the feelings of their mothers. The daughters were all American who hated Chinese, they indirectly exhibit that they never want to be Chinese and they considered themselves too high as Americans. Jing – mei tells:

'I think my mother's English was the worst, but she always thought her Chinese was the best. She spoke Mandarin slightly blurred with a Shanghai dialect' (JLC, p20). 'My mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did. I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese' (JLC, p26).

Jing-mei that since the mother and daughter communicated in different languages Jing-mei finds it difficult to understand her mother: 'My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said' (JLC, 31). In essay titled Mother Tongue, Tan, herself pints out: 'the cultural dilemma with bilingualism, as well linguistic and cultural barriers between Chinese immigrants and dominated discourse.'

Jing-mei fails at the talented show held in her church, she messed up her notes wrong as usually. Jing-mei wants to show her prodigy self to her mother but her mother never encouraged her. So she couldn't exhibit herself well. This is reflected in her adulthood. half a

degree in biology, then half a degree in art, and then finishing neither when I went off to a work for a small ad agency as a secretary, later becoming a copy writer. On the day of Chinese New Year, Suyuan feels, while her daughter selects the bad crab because she wanted her mother to enjoy the better one. That night when Jing-mei feels bad that she was not a prodigy, Suyuan sees the selfless in June and recognizes this as the best quality. She gives her jade pendant telling it is her “life importance”.

The jade pendant symbolizes the Chinese culture. By wearing it she becomes a bearer of Chinese culture. Jing-mei when travel to china to meet her sisters she feels the Chineseness in her. She proves to find her ethnic identity. This is proved by her words: “And now I see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood” (JLC, 352). Lena is trapped in an unhappy married life with Harold. From the beginning of their relationship they have separate bank accounts and they segregate the cost of everything they shared. Harold insisted that keeping their finances separate makes their love purer.

Lena who has inherited her mother’s passivity, believe that she is incapable like her mother to take control over her marriage and her career. When Ying-ying realizes that her daughter exhibits the same qualities in her marriage, she recognizes her weakness. She is ashamed that Lena who was born under the same sign of tiger lacks that spirit in her. So Ying-ying waits like a tiger sits and waits for her daughter, she hears her daughter arguing with her husband. She pushes the vase to invite her daughter to her room. Lena goes upstairs after hearing the crushing sound of the flower vase. She tells her mom that she knew this would happen. Her mother replies: “Then why you don’t stop it?” (JLC, 194). Her mother helps her to reconstruct her identity to preserve her marriage from breaking like that flower vase and to throw away her passivity.

When Rose’s husband Ted asks her for divorce, she is paralyzed with shock and pain. She lies in bed for three days consuming sleeping pills. Finally she is awakened by a phone

call from her mother. She asks her: “Why do you not speak for yourself? Why can you not talk to your husband? I am not telling you to save your marriage. I only say you should speak up” (JLC, 231). Ted calls her a few minutes later to ask her why she has not signed and returned the divorce papers. He announces that he wants the house because he now plans to marry someone else.

So she decides not to sign the papers anymore and informs him to meet her. Rose demands that Ted let her keep their house and she refuses to allow him to uproot her and throw her away: “You can’t just pull me out of your life and throw me away. I saw what I wanted: his eyes, confused, then scared. He was huihuhu. The power of my words was that strong.” (JLC, 234) For the first time in life she asserts herself and Ted is surprised when Rose stands up and is ready to fight for what she wants. Ying-ying and An-mei played a great role in reconstructing their daughters’ identity and helped them build their personality stronger.

Waverly, she finds irritated with her mother, though she made many sacrifices for her to succeed at a young age. She was not allowed to do any house chores but practice chess. Her mother also made arrangements for a separate room to practice so that she was not disturbed by her brothers. Her mother was always watching whether she made the right move, taking part in her practicing sessions, ready to offer her help. Though Waverly had so many amenities, she got frustrated of her protective mother.

Waverly believes that her mother dislikes her white boyfriend, loses courage and decides not to mention her marriage plans. She postpones in doing so. One day finally she discloses and tells her mother that she hated her fiancé. But her mother reveal that she knew about the engagement and that she never hated him. Then Waverly realizes that all these years she has misconstrued her mother. She recognizes her mother’s love and her desire for her daughter to be happy in marriage. She realizes that she has a special connection with her

mother. It is clear that Waverly now wants to become Chinese. “Moving West to reach East” (JLC, 219), shows that her ethnic identity is formed. She feels that this trip to China is a reconciliation. She so long who called herself American finds way out to become Chinese and she moves to become Chinese.

There is a famous quote which says: “Women as the guardians of children possess a great power. They are the molders of their children’s personality and the arbiters of their development” –Ann Oakley. The quote clearly reflects the facts that the mothers’ are responsible and the reason for their daughters’ personality. Whether the personality is either positive or negative still the mother becomes the reason for it.

In the present scenario personality has a great role in every area; in every field that people concentrate on the theories of personality and seek to develop their personality, focus on how to become better in personality. Many people are like Jing-mei who realizes the importance of mother only in their absence. There should be reconciliation between all the mother and daughters universally. ‘No scar, no skin, no flesh’ (Bonesetter’s Daughter, 45). Without mother there is no life, if there is no life there is no humanity, if there is no humanity there is no world.

## Works Cited

- Bechnel, Kim. E. Bloom's How to Write About Amy Tan. York PA: Maple Press, 2009.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Mothers and Daughters" Signs, Vol. 7, No. 1 (autumn, 1981): 200-220. Web. 15. Jan 2019.
- Patil, Mallikarjun. Studies in American Literature. New Delhi: Atlantic publishers, 2009.
- Tan, Amy. "Mother Tongue." The Best American Essays College Edition. Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995.
- Tan, Amy. The Bonesetter's Daughter. New York: Ballantine Books, 2001.
- Tan, Amy. The Joy Luck Club. London: Vintage, 1989.
- Yin, Jing. "Constructing the Other: A Critical Reading of the Joy Luck." Howard Journal of Communications 16 (2005): 149-175. Web. 11 Jan. 2019.